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ABSTRACT

Criticisms of the school as a killer of giftedness in children are cited. After defining giftedness and talent, the problem of educating the gifted child is raised, and opinions of "new left" educational theorists are presented. Accusations against the school, based on its failure to meet the individual needs and the mental or cognitive characteristics of the gifted student, are summarized as are views of humanistic educators on gifted education. Finally, views of Marxist-Leninists on the handling of giftedness are offered. It is concluded that the school, if not a killer, is seen as, at the least, a suffocator of true giftedness. (DB)

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T H E S C H O O L : A K I L L E R O F G I F T E D N E S S ?

(Subject category: Gifted Child Education : quo vadis?)

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J L van der Walt

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ABSTRACT

THE SCHOOL : A KILLER OF GIFTEDNESS?

Radical critics of society sometimes aim their criticism of society at the school since it is frequently assumed by them that the school has increasingly become a manipulative agent of a corrupt (late-bourgeois, capitalistic, post-Christian) society. Criticism is levelled against the school on mainly two grounds: schools manipulate the individual child (including the gifted child) for the selfish purposes of society at large, and in this process the child is robbed of his gift of freedom as an individual; secondly schools are accused of approaching giftedness and talentedness in a one-sided manner, viz. in terms of cognitive ability as defined by means of I.Q.-theory. No attention could be paid in the paper to whether these accusations are legitimate in any sense, but it has become clear that the critics of the school have come to recognize the anthropological fact that also the gifted child is an individual human being who has every right to be educated in a well-balanced manner. Emphasis in school activities on mainly cognition and cognitive ability results in the eventual production of unbalanced persons who are susceptible to manipulation for purposes of a corrupt society at large.

THE SCHOOL: A KILLER OF GIFTEDNESS?

1. INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION

The aim of this paper is to devote attention to a fundamental-pedagogical approach to the handling of giftedness and talentedness in schools. The issue is considered from different sides: first a statement will be made as to what is regarded as giftedness and talentedness for the purposes of this paper; next an outline will be given of the main objections of certain current critics of society (in the form of criticism on schools and education) to the handling of and views on the phenomenon known as giftedness and talentedness in the Western school; subsequently the grounds on which the school is accused of being a killer of giftedness will be considered from three points of view and finally a short evaluation and synopsis will be given.

2. GIFTEDNESS OR TALENTEDNESS

The gifted/talented child or person is an extraordinary child and it is taken for granted that special provision should be made for him in school (or education). A gifted/talented child "deviates from the avarage or normal child in mental characteristics, in sensory abilities, in neuro-muscular or physical characteristics, in social and emotional behavior, in communication abilities... to such an extent that he requires a modification of school practices, or special educational services, in order to develop to his maximum capacity".[1] Thus we should do our utmost "so that talented and gifted youth may fully develop their unique abilities".[2] Giftedness suggests "Leistungsdisposition auf allen Gebieten"[3] (the ability to achieve in all fields), although giftedness is usually regarded as a cognitive quantity/entity.

3. THE PROBLEM

Normally giftedness and talentedness are regarded as a phenomenon which should be identified as soon as possible and be brought to an optimum level of development.[4] Sometimes it is argued that such development should be used towards alleviating the shortage of manpower[5] or towards fulfilling a meaningful role

in society.[6] It is an accepted practice to provide parents/teachers with guidelines (in the spirit in which Karnes and Karnes[7] do it) for the teaching and education of the "gifted" and "talented". On the whole the available literature reflects a mainly uncritical acceptance of the supposition that each individual (including the gifted/talented) should fit in with the accepted aims of the existing broad society and should even adjust to them so that the aims of this society may be furthered and eventually realised by the active participation of the specific incividual.[8]

During the last two decades or so, however, a new school of thought on the status of the (gifted/talented) person in society has emerged. Merely for the sake of convenience this group of thinkers will be called critics of society or leftist educational thinkers, although they do not constitute a homogeneous or monolithic group. They are often simply referred to as the "New Left".[9]

As far as could be ascertained the handling of the gifted and talented child in school has not been fully and systematically treated by members of this "school" but there is ample evidence that in their compassion with the individual they make statements which also have definite implications for the handling of the gifted and talented child. Amongst other things they take the field against the manipulations ("Aussensteuerung") of the individual in the late-capitalistic and late-bourgeois society,[10] even apart from the issue of talentedness. The rejection of the accepted handling of the child - apart from giftedness (or not) - is expressed most boldly in the school criticism of the left radical educational theorists.[11] The point of view of these critics of giftedness can be reduced to the statement that the school monopolises all teaching, that it has appropriated it to itself, thus also the teaching of the gifted child, further that in this way the child is made subservient via the school (just as the school itself has been made subservient) to a dominant and manipulative wealthy capitalistic and (late-)bourgeois Western society.

On the whole those who present their criticism on society in the form of school criticism suspect the school of being a "killer" of the individuality of man and simultaneously a killer of the giftedness with which the individual as a human being is endowed. We shall now look into the accusations against the school in connection with the handling of the individuality of the pupil. Then the accusation that the school handles giftedness and talentedness in a one-sided and manipulating way will be viewed from three sides, namely from the viewpoint of the so-called post-radical new humanists, then from the viewpoint of a Marxist who regards himself as a materialist and a socialist, and finally from the viewpoint of a few radical Marxist-Leninist educational theorists. During this process the sources involved will be investigated closely.

4. ACCUSATIONS AGAINST THE SCHOOL IN CONNECTION WITH THE INDIVIDUALITY OF MAN (I.E. THE PUPIL)

In the literature on this subject it transpires that there is concern about the motives of the school in developing the giftedness potential of the individual. The school, the teacher, the educationalist in general are suspected of allowing the pupil to develop his talent to further their own aims.[12] The school is suspected of smothering the child's capacity for choosing his own destinv; as a matter of fact they talk about a "Vielfaltigkeit und ... Ausmass der Verletzung menschlicher Selbstbestimming in der Schule"[13] (the frequency and extent of the violation of human self-determination in the school). Present society (including the school) is not suitable for the development of all the gifts/abilities of the individual, neither (and this is important to the Marxist) for doing justice to his individuality. Consequently the gifted human being always stays the half freed and pining product of a social dispensation which is not geared to bringing the human being who lives under the (capitalistic) system to the knowledge of his alienation and to a process of change in awareness. In education and teaching an attempt is made to direct the individual according to the accepted values of society.[14]

In a social dispensation of this kind man is assured of his private existence only in so far as he is producing goods. Thus production is a way of private existence. More than 80% of the people in bourgeois society, which has been developed towards embracing capitalism, can still live their lives only because their true being, their productive capacity, is subjected to social relations (which oppose them as an alien power).[16] Teaching (and schools), directed to= wards the getting of qualifications, rules the existence of man (also of the gifted pupil) as subject in practice as well as in theory. He who wants to make himself felt as subject in teaching (and in the school) must be emancipated from the current teaching and the capitalistic system, and as a result run the risk of being alienated from reality.[17]

Berlowitz and Chapman[18] and other writers summarize the Marxist criticism against the school in connection with the social manipulation by the school by saying that the school is an agent for "social control", and has become a "barrier to success" in different ways.[19] Their argument[20] is that education in any society is keyed to the concerns of those who rule and is aimed at preventing social mobility.

5. THE MENTAL OR COGNITIVE GIFTEDNESS OF MAN (I.E. THE PUPIL)

5.1 General

In the previous paragraph a very imcomplete outline was given of the social background against which the contemporary leftist critics see the treatment of man in the greater context of society and in the school. From this short synop= sis it is clear that society in the widest sense, of which the school is regar= ded as being a manipulating agent, is suspected of manipulating the pupil in general and specifically the gifted child, in order to further its own social aims. It cannot be denied that the modern critics of society are sharp and precise in their analyses, but opinions will probably differ on their overall conclusion that Western society is not only fatally ill,[21] but also that it abuses the school for the indoctrination of the rising generation with its

late-bourgeois, post-Christian and late-capitalistic systems of value and norms.[22] Without referring to the gifted child, Illich[23] treats the school as a "bridge" to a better society and the implications are that the gifted child will be able to cross the "school" bridge without difficulty and as a result will be sucked in by the prosperous capitalistic society.

5.2 New humanists (new idea in education; humanistic education) on the handling of giftedness

Later on in this review it will be shown that the twentieth century analysers of society employ reason for specific aims. This also applies therefore to the leftist/humanistic educational thinkers. Mary Anne Raywid[24] for instance, comes to the conclusion that nowadays in leftist circles there is a "direct frontal attack on reason" (and thus also on the one-sided interpretion of giftedness in terms of mental or cognitive potential or ability). In such circles they even assume an openly anti-rationalistic attitude.[25] She brings to the fore a special viewpoint in the handling of the gifted child[26] when she states that the critics of society have grave misgivings against such traditional school practices "as discussion, analysis, and weighing of alternatives". She maintains that these practices are, according to the critics of society, "downright undesirable " (and this is exactly how giftedness is handled in school at present). Thus it is implied that even the handling of the gifted child in the schools is to some extent faulty mainly because emotion and passion play too small a role. For these critics the solution stands to reason: "... if reason, knowledge, and analysis are found wanting when it comes to choosing a program or deciding an issue, it is feeling and passion on which one should depend instead".[27] Facts and knowledge (exactly the things with which the gifted child is being bombarded) have no value unless "something evokes feeling <u>in</u> him"; without that it suffers from a lack of "authenticity for him, and he is just as well off not believing it at all".[28]

Where formerly there was the aspiration to "intellectual upgrading" in the

teaching in schools, also in the handling of giftedness, today there is a "cry... instead for "humanizing" the schools, and the concern is with affective development, not cognitive".[29] It is suggested that the schools fail nowadays - also in terms of giftedness and talentedness - in the sense that they "typically produce "emotional imbeciles", "sensory ignoramuses", and "somatic dumbbells"".[30] From the side of the leftists the conclusion has been made "that we cannot ask of reason and knowledge all that we of the twentieth century have expected of them. And this adds up to a plea for an enlarged sphere and role for the irrational in man". A plea is made "for... a continuously intense emotional engagement with life itself".[31] To substantiate this argument Shannon[32] names a number of highly gifted people (not merely in the field of mental giftedness) who could not make progress at school at all, but in spite of this and of the fact that some of them did not attend school for very long, later on as grown-ups made extraordinary contributions to society at large. Thus teachers are called upon "as leaders of thought" to perform their "duty to encourage rather than stifle those who have turned away from trying to fit yesterday's solutions to the problems of this changing world".[33]

In the new idea in education, supported by a number of contemporary scholars, the work is done from the basis of a Weltanschauung which encompasses the entirety of life of man. Especially in toddler years the stress has to be on "learning to use the mind as opposed to the mere memorizing of facts". The giftedness of masses of people also has to be developed collectively.[34]

5.3 Marxist-Leninists on the handling of giftedness

In contrast to the new humanist (or post-radicalist) alternatives for the handling of giftedness in the shape of the "new idea in education", there are also direct, frontal attacks on the school's one-sided stress on cognitive giftedness of, for example, on the side of the Marxist-Leninist and the (Marxist) materialistic (cf. par. 5.4) societal critics.

What is especially the target in the former is the question of "I.Q.-thinking".

"The prevailing assumption," says Cecilia Pollack, "that the child is responsible for his own quality of learning does not come out of the blue. It stems largely from "I.Q.-thinking" which categorizes children into good or poor learners according to their "innate intelligence", as measured by intelligence or standardized achievement tests" (...) "Actually what the IQ measures is the predictability of academic success in a white middle class dominated school system".[35] The I.Q. test and other standardized tests are directed towards sorting children; "They regularly assess our scholastic achievement, throughout our school careers"; they rob pupils of the opportunity to write creatively, and this leads to "a new illiteracy in writing", which, according to Pollack[36] is detrimental to the development of problem-solving skills, critical and creative patterns of thinking and especially the development of imagination (and, one might add: emotion/affect). The theory of individual differences is largely based on I.Q.-theory;[37] I.Q.-theory also imposes a fictional ceiling on the achievements of children.[38] The school and the teacher are suspected of thinking of intellect (and giftedness) as a static concept, while it should rather be seen as a process of continual growth and development. Problem-solving plays a larger part than memorization and rote learning in this.[39]

In recapitulation, the following reasons are advanced by the Marxist-Leninist thinkers as to why they regard the school as a murderer of giftedness: the teacher is reduced to a simple disseminator of knowledge; the pupil (and this includes the gifted pupil) is reduced to a sponge absorbing knowledge; the pupil is taught that knowledge is static in character, that nothing may be questioned; he is not taught that knowledge is acquired in order to change things; he is not taught a critical approach to things, is not taught to weigh all information up critically, is not forced to apply knowledge in the solution of problems, is forced to absorb and to regurgitate details and factual information, is limited, in the course of the learning process, to forms of thought on the lower cognitive level, has to absorb knowledge that is offered in an authoritarian manner; the pupil's curiosity is inhibited, his intellectual development

is subjected to stricture, he learns that the "learning action" is something mystical, and learns that cognition is the special area of the "gifted", he learns to develop a sense of disgust towards the ongoing acquisition of know= ledge, and is, while at school, usually robbed of critical, creative and heu= ristic patterns of thought. All aspects of this criticism against the school can be ascribed to the "memory-based educational format".[40]

5.4 A (Marxist) Materialist on the handling of giftedness

Another frontal attack on the school's handling of giftedness comes from the side of the (Marxist) Materialist school critics. For the purposes of this study the views of one of the few writers who have taken a stand squarely on the issue of giftedness and its handling will be investigated, viz. Hans-Jochen Gamm.[41]

According to him the crucial problem in the ordinary approach to giftedness is that it is used for economic and social purposes, and in the process the differentiatedness of the phenomenon of giftedness is overlooked.[42] Giftedness as a concept loses its acuity if it is seen in terms of being a pscyhological and not an educational phenomenon, and further it should also be realised that operational giftedness factors do not express themselves in mere intelligence achievements, but that they cohere with all personality factors (such as emo= tional stability, striving for achievement, ability to concentrate). It should also be kept in mind here that a real "Bildungswissenschaftliche Experiment" does not as yet really exist, and that intelligence tests should not be mistaken for that.[43] It should also be seen as a limitation of the school that gifted= ness is always defined in terms of achievement, and that the content of gifted= ness (like the "value" of a field of giftedness) is largely missed. Giftedness is also seen in terms of a noun ("Begabung"), instead of being a verb ("begaben"), which sould indicate social interaction.

Giftedness in the lower levels of the population has also in the past been sup= pressed by the ruling group from coming to full fruition, because this could

not be seen as being in the interests of the preservation of the status quo.[44] This sort of discrimination has in the past been justified as being willed by God, as being willed by nature, or historically justified. In the parliamentary democracies of the West one cannot any more lean on an élite by birth (the nobility), thus the school is used for purposes of "sifting" the "gifted" from among the population, and they are then trained (as a new élite) to represent the population in parliament.

There would also seem to be proofs for the hypothesis that giftedness (in Western society especially) is a mere reaction to technological and economic circumstances, and that certain "changes of base" also result in "changes of giftedness".[45] The question now arises as to how long a new technical or economic phenomenon must be in existence before it becomes educationally relevant, that is, before a corresponding "giftedness" comes into existence.[46]

In contemporary schools there is also an expectation of a kind of philological (language and speech) intelligence, and this inculcates a vicious circle: because (for example) the children of labourers cannot express themselves in the way that middle-class children can, the children of labourers cannot benefit from schools and other educational institutions and means in the same way.[47] Giftedness is thus fixed by the child's belonging to a certain social class, and he can therefore never become understood in a "wertneutral" way; interests and relations based on possession prohibit this. Labourers can, for example, in a capitalist society, not easily be "technically gifted" because they mostly do work of a routine, technically auxiliary nature.[48] For the critical school (with which Gamm mostly deals), the question is whether the giftedness of labourers (constituting the majority of the population) is not directed towards determining and guiding technological development itself, rather than that they simply should go on mutely producing.[49]

Gamm[50] summarizes his objection about the acceptable handling of giftedness by the schools in the following terms: schools, as they are at present con-

stituted, are not suitable for the true "instigation" of giftedness as a result of the large number of social demands (such as the manning of electical appliances) to which the school must accede. New giftednesses before long become important to producers and soon create unknown needs. He recapitulates his crucial criticism of the school in the following terms: "So wird die Schule durch den Prozess der Begabungsweckung und seiner Instrumentiering zu einer gesellschaftlichen Steuerungszentrale".

6. EVALUATION AND RECAPITULATION

Investigation of the criticism of the contemporary handling of giftedness in the school brings to light the fact that the attacks mostly have to do with two facets of being, viz. with the intellectual or cognitive abilities of man, and freedom of man. The latter is mainly outlined in paragraph 4 above, and it already emerges there that it has a strong link with the anthropological structural moment of human individuality,[51] and with the religious ground motif of modern Western thought, viz. the tension between nature and freedom, between the scientific ideal and the personality ideal.[52] Most of the objections against the school on this level rather form a background for the much more strident objections in the first-mentioned field, viz. the view of giftedness as a phenomenon which mostly has to do with the cognitive-analytical ability of the pupil. In constrast to the objections with regard to the freedom of the pupil, these objections hang together with a mode of existence (modality) of man, viz. with the logical-analytical aspect of the human being.

This state of affairs can be explained by noting that all the critics dealt with in this paper can be regarded as irrationalists or even antirationalists.[53] Together with that it should be understood that the twentieth century is the century of analysis of each and every conceivable kind.[54] This combination leads to the fact that the twentieth century is characterized, amongst others, by sharply irrationalist analyses of, for example, the newer humanists, Marxist-Leninists and the (Marxist) materialists dealt with above in par. 5.

The analyses are not done (rationalistically) for their own sake, but for the sake of a purpose, cf. the well-known words of Marx: "Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert, es kömmt drauf an, sie zu verändern".[55] The leftist critics therefore regard cognition, intellectual or rational ability in a special light: it still remains very important[56] but has to play second fiddle; it has to be utilized in order to establish social change. In this light it is understandable that the leftist critics do not have patience any more with the one-sided interpretation of giftedness as intellectual giftedness, also not with I.Q.-theory, memorization and indoctrination, the dissemnation of knowledge, facts and data. Together with the freedom of man the complete man (the gifted pupil) also has to come into his own.[57] Insistence on this forms the core of the so-called "new idea in education" of humanistic education. For this reason Pollack says:[58] "... it is the most profound function of edu= cation to develop the child's intellectual abilities and positive personality traits, of actually forming these in the context of his social reality". For this reason there is very strong stress on the affective and the emotional in the school teaching - also the teaching of the gifted child (cf. par. 5.2).

The school is therefore, in contemporary times, apart from other criticism levelled against it, often suspected of being a killer of talentedness or giftedness. If not this, then it is at least a suffocator of true giftedness. In this survey no attention could be directed at the question as to whether this objection to the school is legitimate; one has to be satisfied with the thought that serious attention will at least have to be directed at this criticism, especially in the light of the criticism on anthropological grounds which indicates that giftedness in our schools is possibly being handled in a one-sided fashion.

Giftedness is not only intellectual or cognitive giftedness.

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